Book review: Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions.

Review
Author(s): Alexandra Smith
Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions by Andreas Schönle
Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 619-621
Published by: Modern Humanities Research Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.106.2.0619
Accessed: 18/03/2014 06:12

where controversial works were often permitted, offering a further, intriguing perspective on this much-misrepresented epoch.

University of Birmingham Rose Whyman

Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions. Ed. by Andreas Schönle. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 2006. ix+383 pp. £44.50. ISBN 978–0–299–22040–2.

Together with the recently published comprehensive study by Maxim Waldstein, *The Soviet Empire of Signs* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), and Edna Andrews's informative book *Conversations with Lotman: Cultural Semiotics in Language, Literature and Cognition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), the present volume is an important contribution to the new wave of Lotman studies that points to a convergence of parallel trends in cultural studies in the West and in Russia. With the disappearance of ideological barriers and censorship in 1991, Russian publishing houses and journals began to explore the generation of theory shaped by the influential ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, and Georges Bataille. The examination of Lotman's ideas in the context of Western cultural developments demonstrates that the Tartu school of semiotic analysis, founded by Iurii Mikhailovich Lotman (1922–93) in the 1960s, developed in parallel with various anthropologically oriented theoretical models created by Western scholars. The latest assessment of the legacy of Lotman's ideas includes various readings, ranging from the Sovietological approach—suggesting that the Soviet intellectual elite was not merely a victim of the Communist regime but also a privileged group within Soviet society—to the belief that the domain of culture was something of a refuge for a community of intellectuals who were opposed to the institutions of power in the Soviet Union. According to Peeter Torop, one of the main tasks of future researchers interested in Lotman's legacy should be the creation of a detailed theoretical history of the Tartu school that would take account of different individual theories and the richness of its intellectual endeavour.

The collection edited by Andreas Schönle might be seen as a stepping-stone for a future comprehensive study of Lotman's contribution to the development of the Tartu school as a community of talented semioticians preoccupied with such notions as semiosphere, autocommunication, abrupt explosion, and coexistence of several semiotic systems within one cultural space. In their informative introduction Schönle and Jeremy Shine provide an excellent survey of Lotman's achievements and point out that 'during the 1970s and 1980s, Lotman's works and those of other Soviet semioticians were broadly influential among West European academic circles' and that Lotman 'next to Bakhtin, was the most widely read and translated theorist of the former Soviet Union' (p. 6). They also note that Lotman's works were more popular in Germany and Italy than in the United States, where they were overshadowed by the influx of translated works authored by French structuralists. According to Schönle and Shine, Lotman's new theory of culture as developed in his later works concerns itself with the mechanism of appropriation of messages into a fluid semiotic environment that

ascribes meaning to them. It appears that Lotman's theoretical turn away from structuralism has been overlooked by many scholars in the West. The present collection redresses this imbalance and contains several contributions that engage and extend the concepts discussed in Lotman's last works, including his unfinished study published in Moscow in 1992—*Culture and Explosion*—which conceptualizes change and innovation, on both the individual and historical scale.

The collection comprises twelve chapters and an essay by William Mills Todd III, 'Afterword: Lotman without Tears' (pp. 345–49), which provides a useful summary of the whole project of the revision of Lotman's theory that has been undertaken by the contributors to Schönle's collection. It states: 'Written by scholars a generation or two younger than Lotman, they address the theoretical and research concerns of contemporary cultural studies, not the past of Tartu–Moscow semiotics. When they revisit Lotman's earlier texts, it is to contrast them with new texts, or, as in Caryl Emerson's creative essay, to repair them with new terms' (p. 348). Undoubtedly, this book will be much appreciated both by cultural historians and by specialists in Russian literature, especially because of the new theoretical directions mapped in various well-researched and engaging essays included in this reader-friendly collection.

The book is divided into five sections: 'Semiotic Collisions and the Ethics of Estrangement'; 'Political Realities and Rhetorical Boundaries'; 'Self-Reflection and the Underground'; 'Iconic Self-Expression'; 'Negotiating the Everyday'. While it is difficult to do justice to all the stimulating ideas discussed in the essays, it is worth mentioning several contributions that engage with Lotman in a creative manner. Thus, David Bethea's juxtaposition of Lotman's ideas on medieval space with Dante and Florensky (pp. 41–58) makes the far-reaching claim that Lotman's reading of Florensky's engagement with Dante might be seen as an extension of Dante's own anxiety about the shift from the medieval to the Renaissance world-view: 'In it we see *homo semioticus* clearly turning away from Florenskii's neomedievalism and toward a neohumanism and neopersonalism quite new and heuristically useful for its own space time' (p. 56). Bethea's analysis can be fruitfully applied to Olga Sedakova's discussion of Dante's relevance to Russian contemporary culture included in her book *Apologiia razuma* [*In Defence of Reason*] (Moscow: Moscow State Industrial University, 2009).

Caryl Emerson's analysis of Lotman's reading of Pushkin's 'Andzhelo' (pp. 84–111) through the prism of Lotman's book *Culture and Explosion* poses an interesting question about the potential for dialogue between Isabella and Angelo that might grow out of a deadlock. Emerson writes: 'When Isabella and Angelo meet at the end—more truly in Pushkin's compressed, cleansed variant, less so in Shakespeare's crueller original—some new language has become available that is inconsistent with anything either has spoken before. Each party acts within new set of competencies. [. . .] In terms provided by *Culture and Explosion*, mercy is no longer at the mercy of a mere recoding or an executive feat. [. . .] Dramatic action is focused in the explosive, unexplained moment and then cut off' (p. 106). Emerson's article implies that Lotman's explosion model of delayed revelation might help us understand both Pushkin and Shakespeare. It enables

us to see any artistic experience in ethical terms: neither 'a textbook nor a guide to morality', to use Lotman's words (p. 107).

In a similar vein, Jonathan Bolton's essay on the representation of everyday life in the works of Lotman, Foucault, and de Certeau (pp. 320–34) highlights the flexible power of Lotman's theoretical model of the everyday, suggesting that a Lotmanian perspective offers a way to explore the ambiguous poetics of the everyday with the help of the notion of a boundary zone of semiosphere that is more imaginative than the model developed by French scholars. In contrast to Foucault and de Certeau, Bolton maintains that 'the overall picture of everyday life that emerges from Lotman is one of a realm of circulation, translations, and contradictions' (p. 342).

Lotman's vision of everyday life as the realm of organized creativity that helps individuals to shape their identities with the help of collisions with larger codes that impose a certain type of behaviour on individuals is given an interesting twist in Andrei Zorin's article 'Lotman's Karamzin and the Late Soviet Liberal Intelligentsia' (pp. 208–26). Commenting on Lotman's 1988 article on Karamzin intended for a non-academic journal, Zorin suggests that the opposition between Karamzin and Speransky might be seen as a mythologized duel between an independent intellectual and a liberal bureaucrat—applicable to Lotman himself (p. 223). According to the logic of Zorin's article, Lotman's belief that 'the personal dignity of a man constitutes not only his personal virtue but also his duty and tribute to the history of his native country' (p. 223) provides a key to understanding Lotman himself and the entire generation of Soviet liberal intellectuals to which he belonged, including Galich, Vatsuro, and Eidelman. Zorin's insightful observations on the canonization of Karamzin in the early 1990s, based on the belief that 'all contemporary questions have their answer in history and that knowing the truth about national history, which had been concealed from the country by the ill-meaning Communists, would resolve all existing problems' (p. 210), pose an interesting question about Lotman's own utopian project to view the interplay between the historical experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a double perspective. Zorin argues that Lotman's interpretation of Karamzin's biography is biased and might be viewed as an attempt to rewrite Russian history in an intellectually stimulating manner. Zorin's analysis of Lotman's contribution to the Karamzin myth provides a compelling argument for a future study of the impact of specificity of Russian culture and Soviet historical experiences on theory produced by Lotman and his Tartu school associates.

University of Edinburgh Alexandra Smith

Engineers of the Soul: In the Footsteps of Stalin's Writers. By Frank Westerman. Trans. by Sam Garrett. London: Harvill Secker. 2010. 306 pp. £14.99. ISBN 978–1–84343–100–8.

This unusual and engrossing book tells the story of two journeys. At the centre of the first lies the figure of the Soviet writer Konstantin Paustovsky, in whom the author Frank Westerman became interested when working as the Moscow correspondent for the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* from 1997 to 2002. Wishing to